



**UNITED STATES MISSION  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

New York, New York

The U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York, New York, was designed and constructed under the U.S. General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program, an initiative to create and preserve outstanding public buildings that will be used and enjoyed now and by future generations of Americans.

April 2013

# **UNITED STATES MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

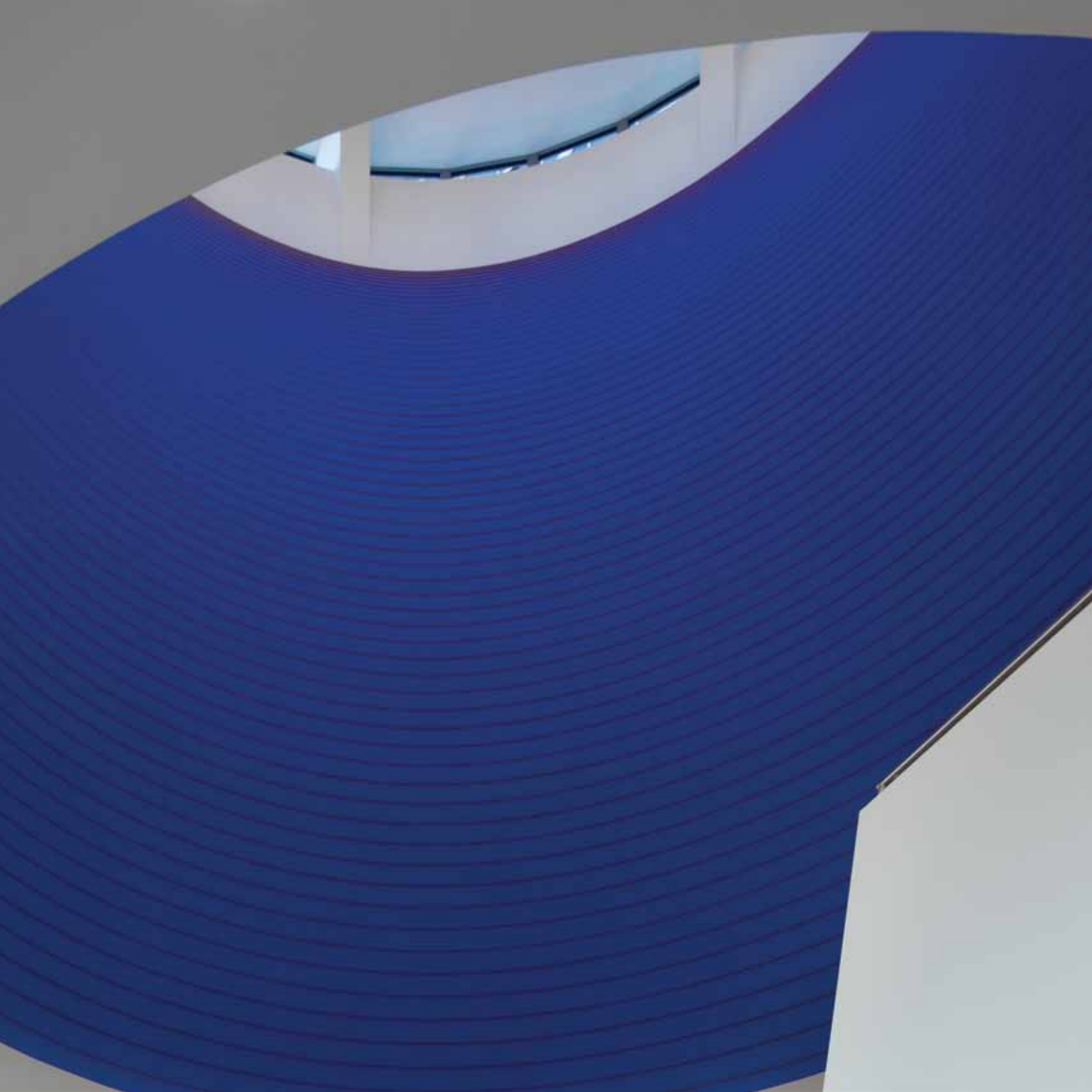
New York, New York

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## A LEGACY OF EXCELLENCE

Responsible for conducting America's affairs abroad since 1789, the United States Department of State is the oldest executive department of the federal government. Its first diplomats asserted American independence; their successors secured the nation's geopolitical position. Although the State Department has assumed many temporary responsibilities, ranging from minting money to taking the census, throughout its history the department has served as the President's primary adviser and implementer of foreign policy.

The State Department carries out its diplomatic duties in a variety of facilities, most recognizably in embassies and consulates in foreign capitals and other important global cities. These buildings enjoy a tradition of high quality. Thomas Jefferson argued that the pursuit of architectural achievement was vital to the American experiment, writing "Design activity and political thought are indivisible." In addition to expressing democratic values, America's inaugural Secretary of State and third President claimed that architecture plays a role in foreign affairs, its objective "to improve the

taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile them to the rest of the world, and procure them its praise."

The State Department has realized Jefferson's vision consistently. One of its first offices was designed by James Hoban, the architect of the White House. Later, in 1875, it would move into a new headquarters—the State, War, and Navy Building. Overseen by Supervising Architect of the Treasury Alfred B. Mullett, the Second Empire-style building was the largest office in the nation's capital and, demonstrating design's role in technological innovation, one of the first in the world to have a telephony infrastructure. With the launch of the U.S. embassy program in 1926, the State Department hired outstanding modernists to express American freedom in architectural form; they included some of the 20th century's best known practitioners, such as Gordon Bunshaft, Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra, and Eero Saarinen. In one sign of these buildings' functionality and symbolic value, Edward Durell Stone's embassy in New Delhi, India, convinced Jacqueline Kennedy to select that architect to design the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.







UNITED STATES REP

- Thomas E. Swann, N.W. 11/18/49
- James I. Watson, N.Y. 11/18/50
- George W. Ball, N.Y. 8-4-51
- George H. W. Bush, TX 3-7-57
- William W. Scrantom, Jr. 3-7-57
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## THE PERMANENT MISSION

While it is similar in purpose to an embassy or consulate, a diplomatic facility that serves the United Nations is called a permanent mission, and America's appointed ambassador to the United Nations is known officially as a permanent representative. The first United States Permanent Mission to the United Nations opened in New York in 1961 at the southwest corner of 45th Street and First Avenue, across from the more expansive United Nations headquarters property. It was designed by the architecture firms Kahn & Jacobs and Kelly & Gruzen. The U.S. General Services Administration, which was established to develop and operate federal civilian workplaces, hired these two New York-based architecture firms in 1956.

The original U.S. Mission facility comprised three volumes. A small auditorium set apart the main office building from neighboring offices and apartment houses to the west. Events like press briefings and diplomatic ceremonies took place in the low-rise auditorium, while in the adjacent main office, the State Department conducted administrative and diplomatic work

specific to the United Nations. The central reinforced-concrete office building reached 12 stories, and it was further distinguished by an exterior shade screen of attenuated concrete hexagons. A gray, buff brick service tower grazed the south-facing side of the main office.

Studies for replacing this building began as early as 1992. "It was extremely overcrowded—too chockablock to suit a permanent representative," says Ed Feiner, former chief architect of GSA. "There was no security, either. It was a building that had outlived its scale and its time."

Security has rightly been the State Department's longtime and paramount concern. Seventy Americans were taken captive from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, and in 1983 the U.S. Embassy in Beirut was destroyed by van explosion. The August 1998 car bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed 224 people including 43 State Department employees, prompted department officials to revise and enhance overall building security standards. Upon release of a report by the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel,

the State Department started a large-scale program of new construction, office moves, and upgrades to bring facilities in line with new ideas about safety.

During this period of scrutiny and tightening of security standards, replacing the U.S. Mission entered concrete planning. GSA would once again take responsibility for developing the New York facility. In order to ensure that the new building incorporated higher security without compromising the State Department's historically high standards of quality, GSA would undertake the project through its acclaimed Design Excellence Program.

Founded in 1994, the Design Excellence Program oversees an innovative, two-stage selection process that regularly attracts respected and emerging American architects to apply for GSA work. The Design Excellence Program also makes sure that a private-sector design expert—a member of its National Registry of Peer Professionals—advises the jury convened from within GSA and the tenant agency to select the most technically qualified design team. After procurement takes place, three

private-sector peers mentor the winning project team through schematic design phases. Their constructive critique has yielded numerous solutions to challenging conditions, as well as award-winning buildings for GSA.

David Childs, the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill architect widely known for his work on Time Warner Center and One World Trade Center, participated in design reviews. “There really was no precedent for this building,” he says of accommodating the U.S. Mission's unique criteria. Or, as Charles Gwathmey stated in a 2002 interview, “All the new security requirements that we had to deal with provoked us to ask, What really is an office building?”

Gwathmey founded the New York-based architecture firm Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects with fellow architect Robert Siegel in 1968. From a submission pool that included more than 30 of the best design firms in America, Gwathmey Siegel was selected to design the U.S. Mission in 1998. Gwathmey passed away a year prior to the new building's completion in 2010.

## DESIGN INSPIRATION

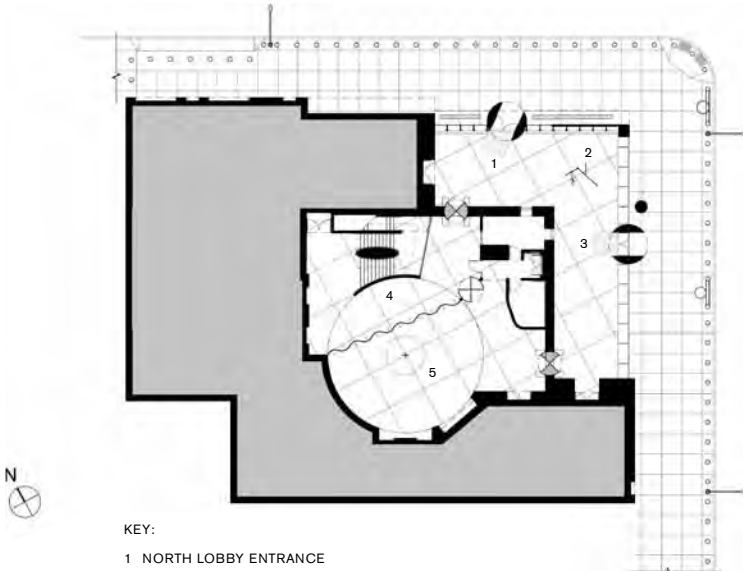
Six years prior to winning the commission to design the U.S. Mission, Gwathmey Siegel had completed a building within dense, historically sensitive conditions similar to its new project. To expand the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the architect created a slim 10-story tower that provides a subtle background for Frank Lloyd Wright's gallery building and its William Wesley Peters–designed annex.

For the U.S. Mission, Gwathmey Siegel sought more equivalence with the nearby United Nations headquarters. “The real inspiration was the U.N. itself,” says Peter Ogman, who served as project architect on the U.S. Mission for the firm. While responding successfully to the U.S. Department of State's programmatic requirements, Gwathmey Siegel challenged itself to create an iconic building that could stand proudly with the landmark across the avenue.

The United Nations headquarters design was selected from 50 proposals, and esteemed architects Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer collaborated on the winning scheme completed in 1952.

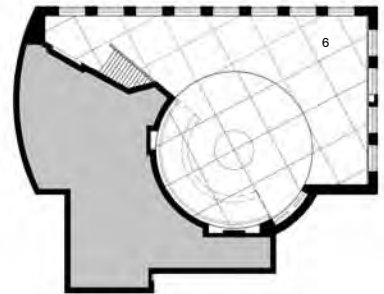
The soaring Secretariat, swooping General Assembly, and pragmatic Conference Building, each expressing its own function discretely, immediately captured people's imaginations. It symbolized achieving world peace through rationalism and transparency.

The famous building complex also captivated the architects who were designing the buildings surrounding the United Nations grounds. Many tried to achieve a dialogue with it. In 1963 Wallace K. Harrison, the New York architect who served as the master planner of the United Nations, broke ground on 860/870 United Nations Plaza; the design's two broad apartment towers and six-story base, finished in darkly tinted glass, were intended to emphasize the lightness of Corbusier and Niemeyer's design. In another example, the United Nations' configuration of volumes was reflected in the three-part composition of the original United States Permanent Mission by Kahn & Jacobs and Kelly & Gruzen. And the rigorously gridded reflecting glass cladding the Kevin Roche–designed United Nations Plaza represents the triumph of rational thinking.



- KEY:
- 1 NORTH LOBBY ENTRANCE
  - 2 PUBLIC SCULPTURE
  - 3 SOUTH LOBBY ENTRANCE
  - 4 NORTH LOBBY
  - 5 SOUTH LOBBY
  - 6 PENTHOUSE ATRIUM

**GROUND FLOOR**



**TOP FLOOR**

**Once you understand the security limitations, they should be a cause for invention and analysis that allows you to push beyond your preconceptions.**

Charles Gwathmey  
Gwathmey Siegel Architects







## COMPLEMENTING THE UNITED NATIONS

Sculpting a building form that relates to the United Nations exemplifies Gwathmey Siegel's "outside-in" approach to the design process. As Siegel says of himself and Gwathmey, "We would not compromise our values related to form making and the use of materials. Although we're always committed to realizing a positive solution to the realities of a program, we were committed to transcending function to infuse our personal form of art in the making of architecture."

At the sidewalk the architecture assumes a cloud-like shape clad in glass whose undulating roof is finished in diamond-shaped titanium-zinc tiles. Each end of this base terminates in a trapezoidal granite form that reaches outward to 45th Street and First Avenue. What Siegel calls the "obelisk" rises 22 stories from this sculptural base. The tower is made entirely of high-strength poured concrete. It is intersected by a cylinder also finished in titanium-zinc tiles, and which surpasses the full height of the concrete tower. Siegel says that using fundamental shapes like these "creates an iconic image."

The shapes also were conceived as a response to the design of the United Nations and to the surrounding buildings inspired by it. He explains: "The term counterpoint refers to the clear difference in the composition and materiality of the new building juxtaposed against the gridded-glass, almost graph-paper-like facade of the Roche Dinkeloo-designed United Nations Plaza. The predominantly solid obelisk shape also is counterpoint to the swooping shape of the General Assembly Building and the glass-gridded main facades of the Secretariat. It stands as a unique object, clearly differentiated from the other buildings in its immediate context."

Gwathmey Siegel's U.S. Mission design demonstrates respect for these two structures as much as difference from them. The slender tower and its accompanying cylinder appears to dovetail with the folds of United Nations Plaza's easternmost wing. And looking at the building from the west, the lobby's granite bookend assumes an angle that aligns with the Secretariat dome perfectly.

## SECURE AND WELCOMING

The geometric composition of the U.S. Mission is organized according to the building's program. The undulating base is a public lobby, the cylinder includes vertical circulation, and the 22-story tower houses offices. This one-to-one correspondence is apparent inside, too. Curved hallways, which connect the elevator bays to administrative spaces, remind users that they are occupying the cylinder. (These spots also offer the best views to the United Nations and East River, to the greatest number of occupants and visitors.) Moreover, a 75-foot-tall penthouse atrium is contained within the space where the cylinder rises above the roofline. The atrium contains an event venue, and its interior wall features Sol LeWitt's forced-perspective *Wall Drawing #832: A red spiral line on blue*.

By designating functions with clear architectural gestures, the U.S. Mission further complements Corbusier and Niemeyer's famous design. But there is one striking contrast between the two: Whereas the United Nations headquarters is surrounded by significant acreage, the U.S. Mission has no such protective zone.

Feiner recalls concerns about the tight space: "The U.S. Mission could adhere to a lot of new State Department security guidelines except for its proximity to the street. You can't achieve a large standoff in New York without ending up with a building like a Bic pen."

The design team would have to compensate for that lack of buffer. Gwathmey Siegel's Ogman says, "Having virtually no standoff distance from the major streets, the mission had to be designed to the most extreme hardness criteria of any building in the United States. The secure portions of the project are located within the tower and protected by poured-concrete exterior walls. Window openings were limited."

Security guidelines for fenestration state that glass size can increase with building height, thanks to greater distance from potential vehicular attack. In turn, the U.S. Mission's windows widen with increasing height in a manner not unlike the spiraling red line in the LeWitt artwork. "Instead of treating the guideline as a limitation, Gwathmey Siegel harnessed it to a positive effect," according to Les Shepherd, GSA's

current chief architect. Of this inspired approach to the windows, he also notes, “With the fenestration Gwathmey Siegel not only illustrates program to people on the street, but also creates a visual signature by which they can remember the building.”

“You always have to respect the pedestrian and the casual viewer,” Ogman says of this signature, “We didn’t want the security of the building to affront people.” That mandate, to engage pedestrians in an appealing way, drove Gwathmey Siegel’s decision making for other aspects of the building exterior. In particular, instead of ignoring the structural tie-holes within the obelisk’s self-consolidating concrete, the design team adapted that necessary feature into a pattern, employing the occasional dummy hole so that the indentations maintain a rhythmic appearance. Additionally, the lobby boasts its organic shape precisely to captivate passers-by, and to draw their attention to a dynamic interior that is open to the public.

Three major artworks contribute to an inviting feel in the lobby. A steel stabile by the famed Alexander Calder, which

the artist had donated to the original U.S. Mission, was moved from temporary display elsewhere and reinstalled on site. Today the sculpture anchors one corner of the lobby, creating its own point-counterpoint with the undulating ceiling above it. In addition, through the support of the Foundation for Art & Preservation in Embassies, an acrylic-latex mural by Odili Donald Odita flanks two elevators with tapered bands in bright pastels. Its companion mural is installed just outside the second-floor Press Conference Room, and the collective artwork is called *Light and Vision*. The Foundation for Art & Preservation in Embassies donated numerous other artworks to the mission building, a collection that includes the LeWitt wall drawing on the 22nd floor.

The third significant artwork is a commission of GSA’s respected Art in Architecture Program. Anna Valentina Murch, a San Francisco-based artist with whom GSA had previously collaborated on an installation at the United States Courthouse in Fresno, California, created *Reflections of Landscape* for the U.S. Mission lobby. The jacquard tapestry

is based on a photograph of a body of water taken in Eldorado National Forest. It is mounted inside an architectural niche, which becomes a window to the landscape image. “Every day the United Nations does work that reminds us of our interconnectedness, that no nation is an island,” Murch explains of her choice of subject. “Water does not recognize borders as it falls as rain and flows through our lakes, rivers, and oceans.” Her *Reflections of Landscape* lends itself to peaceful viewing or to contemplation of the fair distribution of natural resources.

The lobby design stresses public engagement with the artworks. Consider Gwathmey Siegel’s visually lighthanded approach to separating the pedestrians who enter the U.S. Mission lobby. Secure circulation routes mean that authorized State Department employees, members of the press, and diplomatic visitors can travel to their designated places quickly. Yet the imposition does not seem severe, because a meandering screen woven from stainless-steel wire delineates different pedestrian paths almost imperceptibly.

The translucent mesh maximizes viewing opportunities of the three installations, and Gwathmey Siegel’s soaring ceilings and carefully crafted interior surfaces frame the public artworks powerfully. Just as security is incorporated into the U.S. Mission subtly, so is the relationship between architecture and art. The seamless combinations underscore American ingenuity and expression.

In his 2002 interview, Gwathmey observed, “The new security constraints on federal building are opportunities for enriching architecture. Once you understand the security limitations, they should be a cause for invention and analysis that allows you to push beyond your preconceptions. The security issues should allow you to invent a vocabulary that not only solves the problem but also creates an appropriate architectural image.”









**With the fenestration of the U.S. Mission, Gwathmey Siegel creates a visual signature by which people can remember the building.**

Les Shepherd  
GSA Chief Architect

## THE ARCHITECTS AND THE ARTIST

**Charles Gwathmey** (1938–2009) received his Master of Architecture degree in 1962 from Yale University. Two years later he joined the office of Edward Larrabee Barnes, where Robert Siegel supervised office management and served as project architect for large-scale commissions. Gwathmey and Siegel had met previously, as students at New York City’s High School of Music and Art.

Simultaneous to his apprenticeship with Barnes, Gwathmey designed a house and studio for his parents in Amagansett, New York, and he left his full-time position in 1966 to realize the design. The completed residence’s collage of strong geometric forms swiftly elevated Gwathmey’s professional status. “Architectural careers generally develop slowly, which made Gwathmey’s particularly unusual, the architectural equivalent of the young writer who comes out of nowhere and produces a brilliant first novel,” architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote in *The New Yorker*. In 1967, when Barnes was named master planner of the State University of New York at Purchase, he invited Gwathmey to design two campus buildings. To realize

the projects, Gwathmey and Siegel formed a partnership with Richard Henderson in 1968, which, in 1970, became Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects.

Since then the firm has completed more than 400 projects, ranging from education, healthcare, and government building types to commercial offices and cultural institutions. Throughout his career, Gwathmey continually accepted commissions for single-family homes. In 1982 Gwathmey Siegel received the American Institute of Architects’ Architecture Firm Award.

Gwathmey served as president of the board of trustees for The Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies and was elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1981. He taught extensively, and he was the spring 2005 William A. Bernoudy architecture resident at the American Academy in Rome.

**Robert Siegel** describes his 41-year partnership with Charles Gwathmey as “a truly unique non-competitive partnership.” Upon Gwathmey’s death in 2009, Siegel

assumed sole directorship of the firm, and since 2011 the firm has been part of New York–based Gene Kaufman Architect.

In addition to collaborating with Gwathmey closely, Siegel oversaw many of Gwathmey Siegel’s large-scale commercial and institutional projects, such as multiple commissions for the Walt Disney Company and W Hotels. Siegel is well known for his university work, which includes Nanyang Polytechnic in Singapore; East Campus Housing and Academic Center at Columbia University; the School of Agriculture, the Field House/Basketball Arena, and the Theory Center for Computer Research at Cornell University; the Hostos Community College Master Plan and Buildings for the City University of New York, and the adaptive reuse of the landmark B. Altman building on Fifth Avenue for the Graduate Center for the City University of New York.

In 1983, the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects bestowed Siegel its Medal of Honor. Other recognition includes the Pratt Institute Centennial Alumni Award in Architecture

in 1988 and, in 1990, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York State Society of Architects. Siegel was elected a Fellow of The American Institute of Architects in 1991.

Siegel also has served as a design critic, juror, and lecturer at schools of architecture and professional organizations. In 1983 he organized the Pratt Institute Student Intern Program within Gwathmey Siegel. He is the vice chairman and former chairman of the Board of Trustees of Pratt Institute. Previously he served as a member of the Harvard University Graduate School of Design Alumni Advisory Committee. Siegel graduated from Pratt Institute with a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1962 and received his Master of Architecture degree from Harvard University in 1963.

**Anna Valentina Murch** is an artist who works with natural phenomena, light, texture, water, and sound. Since the 1980s she has specialized in large, sensory public art projects that heighten one’s awareness of time and memory. Her work is informed and inspired by research into the history and use of a given site, and

often requires the participation of multiple design disciplines to achieve a seamless integration of art and context. Murch strives to introduce layers of physical poetry to enrich a place, so that it enhances community reflection and interaction.

Notable public commissions include: *Water Scores* at the Center for Performing Arts Plaza, Miami; *Arroyo Suite*, completed for Constellation Place in Century City, Los Angeles; *Cycles*, a courtyard installation at the Queens Civic Court House in New York; and *Sky Tones*, which demarcates an interior public corridor of the Seattle Symphony's Benaroya Hall. Murch has also worked in collaboration with artist Douglas Hollis on *Waterscape* for the San Jose Civic Center Plaza. Prior to creating *Reflections of Landscape* for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, GSA's Art in Architecture Program commissioned Murch to produce *Once Upon a Time in Fresno* for the United States Courthouse in Fresno, California. The artist produced this installation also in collaboration with Hollis.

Born in the United Kingdom and now a United States citizen, Murch received her master's degree from the Royal College

of Art and a Graduate Diploma from the Architectural Association in London. In the late 1970s she moved to San Francisco and developed artwork for galleries and museums. In addition to her practice, she has taught at University of California at Berkeley, the San Francisco Art Institute, and Harvard University. Currently she is a Professor of Art at Mills College in Oakland, California.

Since 1986, the **Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies** has helped install permanent works of art in U.S. embassies in more than 140 countries. For the United States Mission to the United Nations, FAPE and Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, worked closely with the State Department and Gwathmey Siegel to identify more than 180 locations for artwork. In addition to coordinating donations of art, FAPE funded fabrication and installation of site-specific commissions. They include Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #832* inside the rotunda, and *Light and Vision*, the lobby and second-floor works by Odili Donald Odita. A third commission is a sculpture by Ron Gorchov entitled *Totem*, located in the 22nd-floor event venue. The commissions are gifts of the artists.



## THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION TEAM

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Public Buildings Service  
Northeast and Caribbean Region

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Delgado, Theodore Dogonniuck, Sek S. Eng,  
Winnie Eng, Robert Fraga, Joseph Franco, Patricia  
Frankenberg, Wes French, Robert Granato, Maria  
Guida, Peter Han, Lorraine Irizarry, Richard Jobsky,  
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Latterman, Raymond Lewis, Eileen Long Chelales,  
George Lutz, Daren Marshall, David McDonald,  
Carol McNamara, Brian Middendorf, Lydia Ortiz,  
Judy Poskanzer, Boris W. Rojas, Joan M. Ryan,  
John Scorgia, David Seigermeister, Les Shepherd,  
Joseph W. Siegel, Amy Simmons, Albert Viscione,  
Claire Watkins, Crofton Whitfield, Josef Yannotti,  
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The United States Department of State  
United States Mission to the United Nations  
New York Program Branch,  
Office of International Visitors

Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Office of  
Foreign Missions and Facilities Security Division

Bureau of Administration, Office of Operations

Bureau of Information Resource Management,  
Office of Operations and Office of Information  
Technology Infrastructure

New York Foreign Press Center

### Architect

Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects  
New York, New York

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Thomas Levering, partner

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### Artists

Alexander Calder

Sol LeWitt

Anna Valentina Murch

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New York, New York

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Thomas Burns, Mike  
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Gonzalez, William Gove,

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Erika Hoke, Ray Klein,  
Rita Madore, Anthony  
Markopolous, James  
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Loren Roller Schnitzer,  
Steve Zimmerman

**Structural Design**

Severud Associates  
New York, New York

**Mechanical, Electrical, Plumbing  
& Fire Protection Design**

Cosentini Associates  
Consulting Engineers  
New York, New York

**Blast Consultant**

Applied Research Associates,  
Southern Division  
Vicksburg, Mississippi

**Security Consultant**

Ducibella Ventor & Santore  
Integrated Security Systems  
Consultant  
North Haven, Connecticut

**Telecommunications,  
Audiovisual & Acoustics  
Consultant**

Shen Milson & Wilke  
New York, New York

**Geotechnical and  
Civil Engineer**

Parsons Brinckerhoff  
Quade & Douglas  
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**Vertical Transportation  
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Jenkins & Huntington  
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**Environmental Consultant**

ATC Associates  
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National Peers**

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M. Paul Friedberg  
and Partners  
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Mack Scogin  
Mack Scogin Merrill Elam  
Architects  
Atlanta, Georgia

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National Peers**

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Wendy Feuer  
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of Transportation  
New York, New York

**Construction Excellence  
National Peers**

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Walt Huber  
McKissack & McKissack  
Washington, DC

Ralph Johnson  
Mason Johnson  
Williamsburg, Virginia

**U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
AND THE DESIGN EXCELLENCE PROGRAM**

*Public buildings are part of a nation's legacy. They are symbolic of what government is about, not just places where public business is conducted.*

Since its establishment in 1949, the U.S. General Services Administration has been responsible for creating federal workplaces, and for providing all the products and services necessary to make these environments healthy and productive for federal employees and cost-effective for American taxpayers. As builder for the federal civilian government and steward of many of our nation's most valued architectural treasures, GSA is committed to preserving and adding to America's architectural and artistic legacy.

GSA established the Design Excellence Program in 1994 to better achieve these mandates of public architecture. Under this program, administered by the Office of the Chief Architect, GSA has engaged many of the finest architects, designers, engineers, and artists working in America today to design the future landmarks of our nation. Through collaborative partnerships, GSA is implementing the goals of the 1962

*Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture:* producing facilities that reflect the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the federal government, emphasizing designs that embody the finest contemporary and architectural thought; avoiding an official style; and incorporating the work of living American artists in public buildings. In this effort, each building is to be both an individual expression of design excellence and part of a larger body of work representing the best that America's designers and artists can leave to later generations.

To find the best, most creative talent, the Design Excellence Program has simplified the way GSA selects architects and engineers for construction and major renovation projects and opened up opportunities for emerging talent, small, small disadvantaged, and women-owned businesses. The program recognizes and celebrates the creativity and diversity of the American people.

The Design Excellence Program is the recipient of a 2003 National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, and of the 2004 Keystone Award from the American Architectural Foundation.









**U.S. General Services Administration**

Public Buildings Service

Office of the Chief Architect

Design Excellence

1800 F Street NW

Washington, DC 20405

202-501-1888



**U.S. General Services Administration**